

Investigators continue to seek cause of railcar explosion in southeast Omaha that killed 2

By Alia Conley and Flora Zemleni / World-Herald staff writers | Posted: Wednesday, April 15, 2015 12:00 pm

Authorities on Wednesday were continuing to investigate the cause of a rail yard explosion that killed two men Tuesday in southeast Omaha.

The force of the blast blew one man off a tanker car and to the ground, while the ladder shot out of the car and left another man rapped.

A third man was also blown off the car, but he was wearing a harness, which kept him from having any serious injuries, said Scott Allen, a spokesman for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is investigating the incident.

One of the men killed, identified Wednesday as Dallas Foulk, 40, was lying on the ground when first responders arrived. He died after being taken in extremely critical condition to Creighton University Medical Center.

The other man's body was extricated by Omaha firefighters about 6 hours after the explosion. He was identified Wednesday evening as Adrian LaPour, 44.

Police said autopsies were scheduled to be performed on both men Wednesday.

Battalion Chief Tim McCaw of the Omaha Fire Department said the two men were cleaning out a tanker car near First and Hickory Streets about 1:10 p.m. when the explosion occurred.

"They were on their way out," McCaw said. "(Witnesses) said that they had heard an explosion from the railcar, and one person was lying on the ground when crews arrived."

Crews were unable to immediately enter the car because of unsafe levels of hazardous materials. They had tested the levels at least twice.

"We always err on the side of caution," McCaw said. "You have to just kind of wait, do the ventilation, do your due diligence and then let the readings come down before we enter."

Before it was safe to enter, firefighters were not able to communicate with the trapped man but had "obtained a visual," McCaw said.

Officials of the department's Special Operations team first entered the tanker about 7:15 p.m. and recovered the rapped man 15 minutes later, McCaw said. The man was pronounced dead at the scene.

Investigators are still determining what types of chemicals were in the car and what caused the blast.



rail accident (teaser)

Omaha firefighters respond to an accident on the railroad tracks near 1st and Hickory Streets in Omaha, Neb., Tuesday, April 14, 2015.

The two men worked at Nebraska Railcar Cleaning Services, hired by GE Capital Rail Services, said a GE spokesperson.

OSHA has inspected the business three times in the last five years, the most recent being a follow-up inspection in March.

That case is still open.

The federal agency determined that there were seven violations from complaints in 2013, related to flammable and combustible liquids, confined spaces permits, noise exposure, respiratory protection and powered industrial trucks.

Nebraska Railcar Cleaning Services paid nearly \$7,000 to resolve the violation allegations, according to inspection documents.

"These incidents are preventable and often predictable, and that is why it is imperative the employer ensure that all OSHA standards and regulations are followed," said Allen, the agency spokesman.

According to the cleaning company's website, workers can clean a wide array of commodities, including food grade oils, herbicides, petroleum, sand and soils. It is unclear what substance the tanker held.

To clean a tanker car, two workers use a portable steam boiler to heat up the car and then clean with a hot water power washer, the website said.

All workers are certified with hazardous waste, fire, safety and medical training, the website said.

Nebraska Secretary of State filings show that Steven M. Braithwaite is the managing member of the cleaning service company and president of Omaha TransLoading Corp., a company housed in the same building at 115 Hickory St.

Attempts to reach Braithwaite or workers at the companies were unsuccessful.

GE Capital released a statement Tuesday:

"Right now we are focused on the safety of those in the shop and our thoughts and sympathies are with those who were affected by this unfortunate accident."

Andy Tornow, 35, who works at body shop Paul Lucht and Sons Inc., at 1519 S. Third St., said he heard a sound like two trains colliding, turned around and saw flames shooting 30 to 50 feet in the air.

"It sounded ... just percussion ... just big," he said. "Then it became dead silent."

Thirty firefighters responded. Officials from the Omaha Police Department, OSHA and BNSF Railway Co., which owns the track and train lines, were also at the scene.

World-Herald staff writers Maggie O'Brien and Barbara Soderlin contributed to this report.

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Correction: An earlier version of this story mistakenly spelled Dallas Foulk's last name as Faulk, based on initial reports from authorities.



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